

PACIFIC REGIONAL ORAL HISTORY AND ETHNIC STUDIES PROGRAM
UNIVERSITY OF HAWAII

Oral History in Hawaii

We are all familiar with the traditional history book. The well researched, carefully prepared history provides us with good documentation as to who did what, when they did it, and often, why it might have been done in that particular manner. As essential as such work is to an understanding of the development of the community, there is lacking an important dimension. We do not often recognize people as people in such narratives. All of us expect governors, diplomats, successful business, and colorful eccentrics to appear in the pages of any well prepared narrative. Given Hawaii's colorful and unique past, our pages are more than usually well filled with such people. What other state can debate the correct geneology of its kings?

After we have been entertained and informed about the doings of the important and significant people, we still need to know what those who make possible the history were doing. People leave mostly people behind them. Each family treasures a collection of anecdotal material which changes rapidly in factual and color content as the years pass. Seriously, the experiences of our families are a significant portion of the history of the community--just as much as the history of the power elite is the history of the community. Some effort must be made to retrieve the experiences of those whose experiences have contributed to the community as we find it.

Historians must have documents in order to write history. Sometimes we are cursed with too many documents and have difficulty evaluating all of them. Too often documents are destroyed--accidentally and purposely. The bulk of the population of any given period presents an additional problem--they generate no documentary material. Most of us do not save correspondence, bills, records, and the other papers associated with our lives.

Oral History is a means of creating primary source materials. It is an effort to fill the gaps left by the preoccupation of people with their lives. The personal documents--the letters and notes of conversations which are so helpful to the historian are never prepared by the bulk of people. Through the techniques of oral history, we aim to provide just such material. The processes illustrated here are the procedures we employ to ensure that the information obtained will be something more than the "telling of tales." The oral historian strives to correct the problem of the faulty memory, the lack of organized recall, and the dangerous tendency to create fictions which conveniently explain all. The pitfalls are many but the rewards are equally great.

The human dimension which oral history can add has the capacity to transform history from the recital of access to power and the exercise of power to an insight into how people have developed. Hawaii's unusual ethnic composition provides an outstanding example to give the world the experiences of Hawaii's peoples in a new and unusual depth. You can contribute to this richness by supporting the work of the various ethnic groups. The work of the Chinese History Center is an outstanding example of the contribution which can be made by people determined to make known their past. As the Honolulu Advertiser put it in an editorial, "...it will take an active interest from all citizens to insure that the records all historians work with are as complete and representative as possible." (10-18-70)

The diagrams before you represent the stages through which the oral history process passes. As you follow the steps, ask yourself how your experiences or those of your family, or even those of people you know, would fit into the program of preserving Hawaii's ethnic history.